

Addressing an Apparent Contradiction in the Islamic Sources: Was the Prophet Illiterate?

by

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Question

When we read 7:158 & 29:48, we see that the Prophet (peace be upon him) was an illiterate who was not capable of writing, yet in Saheeh Bukhari, Volume 3, Book 49, Number 863 and other ahadith, we observe that the Prophet (peace be upon him) was able to write. How do we reconcile this apparent contradiction?

Answer

The scholars offered a number of alternative explanations.

One: Allah supernaturally intervened and temporarily gave the Prophet (peace be upon him) the ability to write, regardless of whether the Prophet (peace be upon him) was aware of what he was actually writing (since he was not able to read) or was informed at that time of what he was writing. The scholars who take this opinion see this as one of his miracles and that this does not contradict the Qur'anic verses regarding the Prophet's (peace be upon him) illiteracy.

Two: The Qur'an only talks about the Prophet's illiteracy **before Prophethood** and does not comment on its impossibility **after** he received the revelation. Given this, it is possible that the Prophet (peace be upon him) learned how to write at a later stage in his life. This does not negate the miracle of his illiteracy, since it was only until after the Qur'an was revealed, Islam's spreading widely, the Muslims increased in number, and the miracle made apparent, did the Prophet (peace be upon him) then learn how to write.

Three: The Prophet (peace be upon him) being an Ummi does not contradict the notion that he can write his name or a few words. One could be an "Ummi" and know how to write a little bit. The word "Ummi" is only applied to those who generally are not able to write.

Four: This is the majority position of the scholars, and that is that other narrations from the hadith literature clarify that "wrote" in the specific hadith in question actually means "had written down" by someone else.

The above has been summarized from pages 390-401 of the book [الأحاديث المشككة الواردة في تفسير القرآن الكريم عرض ودراسة](#) by أحمد بن عبد العزيز بن مقرن القصير.

I recommend the fourth option, given that the evidence clearly shows that the Prophet (peace be

upon him) was illiterate and that no clear evidence exists showing that the Prophet (peace be upon him) at a later stage in his life learned how to write.

However, at the same time, I also believe that no clear evidence exists demonstrating that the Prophet (peace be upon him) died illiterate. This is only an assumption; hence, one cannot be condemned for believing that the Prophet (peace be upon him) learned how to write before he died. There is a valid disagreement concerning this issue.

However, there is a consensus on the fact that the Prophet (peace be upon him) was illiterate before Islam spread and the Qur'an was revealed, and hence his illiteracy (regardless of whether you believe it was temporary or permanent until he passed away) was a miracle of his, for it demonstrated that he could not have been the author of the Qur'an. That is what ultimately matters at the end of the day.